CHAPTER 25

NEW CONTINGENCY MISSIONS

By October, 1982, it became apparent that a United States presence would be required in Lebanon for longer than expected. The Marines requested that the Navy Broadcasting Service send in one of its Mini-SITE systems. Rizer's office agreed. It also offered to provide its prototype mobile station that it had put together at the request of AFIS to support the Rapid Deployment Forces. After a brief discussion, the Marine Command in Beruit made a formal request to bring the stations overseas.

John Burlage, who served as Rizer's second Command Master Chief at the Navy Broadcasting Service, helped staff the mobile detachments sent to Beruit. He served as station manager himself. He described that station as both evolutionary and revolutionary in its use of state-of-the-art equipment. Lieutenant Robert Nash also had helped put the first station together and then commanded the first wave to go in to Lebanon. He recalled that the AFRS mobile vans that operated during World War II and Korea were pretty cumbersome. It took a long time to get them installed and on the air. In contrast, Jordan Rizer's Navy mobile broadcast studio could fit into a C-130 aircraft, fit onto a forklift and be on the air in a couple of hours.

With the Marines' request in hand, Lt. Nash and his five-man NBS detachment moved the station by truck from Arlington to Norfolk. From there, it flew by C-141 to Italy and then by C-130 to Beirut. Once there, the unit put the station on a fork lift. Then they drove it to the Marine headquarters compound, a couple of hundred yards up the hill from the international airport. The Lebanese government had given permission for the station to go on the air. The only problem was getting the AFRTS shortwave signal into Beirut to provide the news and sports. Until they could make arrangements to bring in the AFRTS radio feed via satellite, land lines, or undersea cable, the staff did the next best thing. It went into town and obtained newscopy from the local AP office.

The radio station went on the air ten hours after the detachment arrived on December 15th. It began a regular broadcast schedule from 6:00 AM until Midnight with the AFRTS package, news and sports. On the television side, the Mini-SITE system initially amounted to some playback machines and monitors that AFRTS moved to the Marine units. As a result, Nash's unit studied the feasibility of transmitting television signals to the men from a central location. It took until the beginning of May to obtain permission from the government to radiate and bring in the low-powered transmitters. Broadcasts could only reach within the Marine Perimeter. They carried the AFRTS entertainment package, live locally-produced television news and occasional interviews with visiting officials.

During the first detachment's tour in Lebanon, which lasted just over four months, the Marines' main enemy was the dreariness of their duties, the climate and the dirt. Instead of their traditional deployment as a reacting force that went in, did its job and left, the Marines found themselves in primarily a passive role. In such a circumstance, AFRTS' radio and television went a long way to relieving the boredom and frustrations.(1)

The uncertainty didn't change much until the fourth wave went into Lebanon on July 5, 1983. Burlage recalled that when he went to Lebanon, he didn't expect to find himself in a dangerous assignment.

"Admittedly, no. When we went over there, while it was no game, it was more of a chance to get over there and do good things for the troops and maybe live under some rigorous conditions. Under no stretch of the imagination did we think we'd become the enemy!"

From that time until November, when the fifth and last wave of broadcasters left following the infamous truck bomb attack on the Marine compound, the war status deteriorated. The news, entertainment, and most important, command information, became crucial.

AFRTS STAFFERS SERVE IN LEBANON

Burlage summarized the value of the stations in recounting one brief moment following a mortar attack that wounded some men with shrapnel. Although at least one round hit within fifty yards of the station, radio and TV stayed on the air. Taking a break, Burlage watched as some walking wounded passed the station compound on their way to be evacuated to the hospital ship. The men were "beat to hell, in very rough shape. They were being led by a few friends. As they walked by, I'll never forget it, we stood up and looked at them. They stopped and came up to our fence. One of them said, 'I just want to thank you guys for what you've been doing for us. You've done us a great favor. You were here when we needed you.' This was from guys who'd been wounded! These were all big, tough Marines who'd been through mortar fire and all the rest. It was a few minutes before any of us could talk!"(2)

The fifth wave, which arrived in Lebanon on September 8, 1983, contributed even more valuable services as

the conflict continued to deteriorate. Joe Ciokin, who served as the station manager, recalled that when they volunteered, he and his men were aware that Beruit was a "big-risk area." Nevertheless, he considered the struggle there as one in which the "the factions were fighting among themselves and it was not really the Americans who were the target. We were just there as a peacekeeping force and that was the uppermost thought in our mind - peacekeeping." By the time his unit assembled in Washington D.C. for its predeparture briefing that September, the Marines had come under increased attack. Ciokin acknowledged that the escalating combat "caused us some real concern. In fact, about four days before we arrived, the Lebanese began the most intense hostile fire of the period and it was to continue throughout our tenure."(3)

As with the previous broadcast detachments, the fifth wave took over operation of the station in less than a day's time. Once in place, Ciokin and his men established their own personality for the station while maintaining a typical AFRTS operation on both radio and television. Using the minicam equipment, Ciokin's men tried "to put as many Marine faces on the tube as we could, just as a morale-type thing. We ran the tapes after the network evening news. Without any production facilities, however, we couldn't do any fancy stuff. We could do a kind of cut-and-paste type thing with the shooting, but essentially we just put it straight on, practically from the camera." In addition, the station taped for later broadcast, press conferences and visits from such VIPs as Vice President George Bush and Marine Commandant General P.X. Kelley.(4)

While the unit developed as normal a routine as possible, Ciokin worked on plans to move the station to more secure quarters. He'd never been happy with the location of the facilities, a feeling that his whole unit shared. "The men's sleeping quarters were an open-air tent. We were out in the tree line and in between the BLT (Battalion Landing Team) and the other buildings. We were wide open to the highway. Anybody driving by could've shot a B-40 rocket or something else at us point blank. We felt very, very exposed being out there like that. We had sandbags, but that's about all the protection we had!

"We needed a more secure installation especially, as we were looking at it then, if we were in there for the long haul. Then, definitely we wanted to get a more secure site. And, of course, the engineers, being technical types, were always looking for better environments for their equipment. That added even more pressure to the need for a permanent facility."(5)

The Marines settled on the Lebanese Civil Aviation Building as a practicable site. After negotiations, they reached an agreement to obtain sufficient space for the station and quarters for the staff. On October 22, with assistance from the Marines, Ciokin and his men moved the van next to the building. They created a television studio inside with sleeping accommodations across the hall.

AFRTS' STAFFERS ESCAPE CERTAIN DEATH

At 6:00 AM, the morning radio man, Bob Rucker, signed on the air, cutting away from the AFRTS network feed that ran when the station was not broadcasting "live." After introducing the canned program, Rucker went to shave. If the station had not moved the day before, he'd have used a washbasin in one of the tents. Instead he chose to use the facilities inside the building. That's where he was when the suicide bomber drove his truck into the Marine compound and exploded it inside the barracks, killing two hundred and forty-one marines and sailors!(6)

Rucker was briefly trapped when the ceiling came down on him, jamming the door shut. Ciokin was blown across the room because he was on the side closest to the explosion. He and his roommate scrambled up and then "hid under a table just like kids, thinking that we'd been hit by artillery." Because of the earlier bombing of the U.S. Embassy and alerts the station had been receiving every night, they soon realized what had happened.(7)

The blast knocked the radio station off the air and extensively damaged the television equipment. However, Ciokin's immediate reaction focused on the need to help in the rescue operations, not the station.

"None of us gave it a second thought."

The move to the more secure location had saved all the broadcasters' lives, although most suffered minor injuries. Ciokin's men immediately joined the efforts to pull survivors out of the destroyed building. Once the immediate shock of the explosion passed, Ciokin realized that enough rescuers had arrived. He collected his men and set about to put the station back on the air.(8)

The staff needed a week to obtain necessary parts from abroad to put TV back in operation. They were able to get radio back on the air in five hours and began broadcasting command information, providing a morale boost with music and commentary. The programming had an immediate impact.

"When the Marines were able to get out of the perimeter, which was almost the next day, the first thing they told us was what it meant to them to hear radio come back on the air. We were their beacon of hope. It told them that we were surviving, that we were still alive!"(9)

Despite the tragedy, the station broadcast its regular entertainment programming as soon as it returned to the

air. In the immediate post-explosion period, the station's primary aim was to update the story as events took place so that the Marines would know what was happening.

The station was fulfilling its mission under trying circumstances in the best tradition of AFRTS. Yet, Ciokin soon discovered the programming was not having the expected effect on morale. The fifth or sixth day after the explosion, he ran into a Marine Sergeant Major who told him, "You know, we've gotta do something. Everybody's walking around depressed. Everybody's down. We've gotta do something to bring them back, to build up their morale again and get them over this hump and revive their spirits, so to speak."(10)

The station manager looked at the local programming his staff was producing and suddenly realized that most of the material they broadcast reflected his *own* men's depression! "Everybody in the compound was walking around like a bunch of zombies, our heads down, dragging our feet. The radio station was doing the same thing. All the stuff we were playing was heavy metal, bang, crash, all that kind of stuff. It just was dark, depressive music."

Ciokin discussed the low spirits with his staff and worked with them to make the programming more upbeat. "We played games with the Marines. There was a Marine they called 'the Ugliest Marine in Lebanon.' We played a joke on him. We also started getting into birthdays and into plans for going home with an emphasis on how the Marines would overcome the problems."(11)

The new programming had an immediate impact. The compound "began to turn around. The Marines started coming back at us the same way, joking at us, razzing us when they saw us." To Ciokin, the post-explosion efforts illustrated how any good broadcast operation had to "be aware of the audience, respond to the audience's needs, because you were going to create within the audience certain responses." In his estimation, the station in Beruit had accomplished the most "crucial" AFRTS job since Vietnam, "obviously the most important. The mission was the precise one for which AFRTS was created - morale, information and news."(12)

ANOTHER UNIQUE TEST

Lebanon and Honduras provided unique tests for AFRTS. It's success in carrying out the mission validates the effectiveness of the organization in preparing its personnel for their jobs. Lebanon showed forth the true commitment that armed forces broadcasters have for their work and the audiences they serve. Yet, it may be that the more "normal" station operation, in the end, confirms the importance of the job which AFRTS has now accomplished for more than fifty years.

On April 1, 1985, General Robert Herres sent a telex to AFIS from his command in Greenland regarding the testing of SATNET service to Thule and Sondrestrom. In his message, the General advised: "I strongly request immediate, permanent authority for transmission of live AFRTS-TV SATNET Programming to Sondrestrom AB and Thule AB, Greenland. Since signal testing began in January, with live news and sports programming, there has been a noticeable morale boost.

"Discontinuing the service would significantly degrade the Air Force's vital internal information mission. It would severely impact on troop morale and welfare. The SATNET programming is essential for improving quality of life and working conditions for our people at two of the most remote, severe weather sites in the world. The SATNET feed is their primary real-time contact with what is happening in the outside world. Every effort should be made with FCC and other federal and commercial agencies to insure continued AFRTS SATNET service for Greenland."

Every AFRTS outlet has its unique set of problems and fulfills the particular needs of the location and personnel it serves. If the outlets maintain a commercial-like operation with traditions developed over many years, other stations such as in Beruit will come and go as our forces deploy and then withdraw.

Following Ciokin's detachment, wave six arrived. It quickly scaled down because of the concern for security and the decision by the Marine Corps commander to eliminate as many noncombatants as possible. The vans and television equipment left Beruit along with the Marine peacekeeping force.

AFRTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

In Central America, AFRTS has continued to provide service from Panama to Honduras. At the request of the Southern Command, on October 3, 1983, Senior Chief Bobbie Carleton and Master Chief David Rook helped put together three mobile stations and fly them into Honduras. By that time, AFRTS radio and television had almost become an accepted component in remote contingency operations.

After accumulating the hardware and the support equipment in Sacramento, Master Chief Rook led the three teams into Honduras. There, Carleton set up two of the three stations. She and Petty Officer First Class Ed Fischer operated one of the radio and television outlets for two months until the Army left that part of Honduras. Each of the three stations serviced the three major concentrations of U.S. Forces conducting training and exercises in the Central American country.

With agreements already negotiated with the government, Carleton faced only one problem in putting the

station on the air in Puerta Castillo. She would have to coordinate with the Army staff officers in selecting an acceptable site. Carleton and her counterparts at the other two locations had to deal with two chains of commands. One was the Navy Broadcasting Service back in Arlington, Virginia, and the other was with the local host commander.(13)

The operation of the Broadcasting Services presumed to eliminate problems with the commanders in the field. In practice, that didn't happen.

"It's a very difficult thing for a strange cat-and-dog outfit like broadcasting to go into an operational environment where you're dealing with tank commanders and pilots and combat warriors. Try to explain to them what you're all about and have them understand. These are the rifle-carrying warriors. They see you as somebody else to carry a rifle. They see you as somebody else to go in there and augment their ground forces. These commanders sometimes have a tendency to meddle inappropriately. Some of it really isn't meddling. Some of it is very appropriate. Sometimes our own people, our broadcast people, can't deal with a commander, nor recognize the difference between meddling and appropriate involvement."(14)

In the end, as with Carleton in Honduras, the primary AFRTS mission continues to serve the local commander with command information directly over radio and TV. Since the commander in the field remains the "operational" boss of the station in his area, managers have had to devise ways to interface with the command. In Carleton's case, it required working out decisions on the entertainment material and the length of the broadcast day. It meant developing with the commander "a continuing kind of trust in me. The success of any of the mobile detachments depends very heavily on such interpersonal relations."(15)

These vignettes notwithstanding, it is dangerous to compare the requirements of soldiers stationed in places like Germany, Italy or Japan with situations in Beruit, or in a remote radar site in Turkey, in the Sinai desert or in Honduras. Yet, there is a common thread. Those mobile stations that Carleton helped to put in operation clearly provided crucial links to home. They insured the dissemination of news and information and maintenance of morale among their audiences. As Carleton noted, in a place like Honduras, the "audience is absolutely captive. When the BLT was blown up in Beruit, the entire encampment was staying around the station all the time. We were their only link to find out what was going on."

The operation in Honduras was the first time that AFRTS followed the deployment of operational forces so closely with stations. According to Carleton, the deployment "was an almost with `em situation...very much worth the effort." The broadcasters, almost from the first day, became "part of the outfits. Those men would have bent over backwards for us. They wanted us there." Once, when she had to shut down the radio transmissions for a short time to install a TV antenna, she found the whole camp outside the van. They all wanted to help her get the job done so that the station could go back on the air as soon as possible.(16)

Today these vans are gone but the station at Palmerola/Sato Cano Air Base provides television and FM radio services as part of the Southern Command Network.

In Panama AFRTS would cover the first shooting war since Vietnam. The months leading to the U.S. military action in Panama, dubbed Operation Just Cause, were filled with great uncertainty and anxiety for not only the people of Panama, but for the leadership and crew of the Southern Command Network (SCN).

The balloon went up for SCN on December 16th 1989 with the shooting death of Navy Lieutenant Paz. However, due to the increasing tensions between the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) and the U.S. military, a drawdown of U.S. Forces and families and a shortening of military tours from 36 to either 24 or 12 months had begun during June 1989. As a result, by December 16th, SCN had lost about one third of its staff and many of those remaining had less than 60 days on board. Additionally, both the Program Director and the News Director were on emergency leave in the U.S. during the initial period of Just Cause. The success or failure of SCN's operations depended on the Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Gaylord, and a relatively young, inexperienced staff.

Many preparations, however, had already been accomplished prior to this date to include the prepositioning of backup equipment in case the fixed facilities at Fort Clayton were damaged or destroyed. LTC Gaylord called together all section supervisors on December 19th to increase the network's operational readiness. The SCN mobile van was deployed to Quarry Heights, headquarters of the U.S. Southern Command, to establish a backup microwave link to SCN and an engineer was dispatched to the main Pacific side transmitter and microwave relay site on Ancon Hill, just above Quarry Heights.

As the time for combat action drew near, electronic news gathering (ENG) teams were formed and deployed to various locations. An SCN news team covered the midnight swearing-in of President Endara and the Panamanian government which had been democratically elected in May but not allowed to take office by General Manuel Noriega and his PDF.

Once hostilities commenced during the early morning hours of December 20th, SCN, using its mobile van and

ENG teams, supported the Pentagon Media Pool as well as its own broadcasts with video and audio of the deployment of both in-country as well as U.S. based forces. Using its microwave antenna, the news video and audio was fed by the van to a satellite uplink back to the U.S. and to the SCN studios at Fort Clayton. In coordination with the Public Affairs Office of the Southern Command, SCN began a continuous feed of local announcements and reports, and provided all available stateside media coverage. This kept rumors at bay, provided up-to-date information on local personnel movement limitations, and provided continuous news coverage of combat and political activity.

With the help of reports provided by the U.S. media, especially the Cable News Network, which were received by SCN's 11 meter programmable satellite antenna, the American audience was never out-of-touch with the action in Panama, and with the stateside and worldwide reaction to Operation Just Cause. In fact, SCN was the only radio or television station on-the-air in the Panama City and Canal Area during the first days of action. It became clear later that most of the people in Panama; American, Panamanian, and other nationals, were tuned-in to SCN sometime during those days of crisis.

The staff of SCN became combat hardened broadcasting veterans during Operation Just Cause. Their can-do attitude and physical stamina kept them going for 48 and even 72 hours straight without sleep or rest. Colonel Gaylord and his staff succeeded against the odds. A full, detailed story of their experiences and accomplishments was written by Air Force Master Sergeant Bob Autry, who was the supervisor of broadcast operations for SCN during this period, and published by the Army under the title "Just Another Day in Paradise - AFRTS in a Combat Environment".

OPERATIONS DESERT SHIELD AND DESERT STORM

Within three days of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the Navy Broadcasting Service, as the AFRTS worldwide contingency mission operator, began preparations for deployment of its four contingency broadcast vans to the Persian Gulf area. Within a few days AFIS advised the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) of the AFRTS capabilities and assets available for support of the troops being deployed to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf. At the same time, Navy Broadcasting took the initiative to preposition two of the vans at Manama, Bahrain.

By September 5th, only a month after President Bush had ordered the first deployment of U.S. troops to the Persian Gulf area, one of the vans was on-the-air with low powered FM broadcasts at King Fahd International Airport near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and within a week, two more vans were broadcasting at Al Jubayl and Riyadh. All of these operations, however, operated strictly in a test mode because official approval by CENTCOM was not given until September 19th.

During October, three of the vans, Dhahran, Riyadh, and Al Jubayl, began 24-hour local radio services and began limited television service using low-powered transmitters carrying the SATNET programming. The first crews for these stations were volunteers from AFRTS facilities throughout the world. The first 17 had been assigned to Saudi Arabia on 90-day temporary duty orders and by December they were being replaced by the second shift of broadcasters and technicians. However, the toughest tasks, that of putting these vans on-the-air in the extreme heat and sand of the desert, had been accomplished well and with great speed.

With the decision by the President in late November to build-up the U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, a small AFRTS headquarters became necessary for establishing a network organization using the existing manned stations and dozens of unmanned low powered transmitters picking-up the signals from the manned locations. Lieutenant Colonel Bob Gaylord, fresh from his experience with Operation Just Cause in Panama, was sent by AFIS to command the new network, with Air Force Captain, Jeff Whitted, as his deputy, and Sergeant Major Bob Nelson as his senior noncommissioned officer. A fourth manned station began full broadcast radio and television operations at King Khalid Military City on December 10th.

The Desert Shield Network's (after January 17, 1991 to be called the Desert Storm Network) toughest task was to find locations for putting-up its many antennas. The one thing that AFRTS did not have available immediately was enough portable and transportable towers to cover such a wide area with low-powered radio and television. After all, the network had to cover a part of Saudi Arabia equal to the area between Illinois, Maine and Virginia. Due to the diligence and ingenuity of its technicians, and much help from the Arab and American Oil Company (ARAMCO), antennas were placed on everything from existing communications towers to soccer field light towers.

By the time the air war started on January 17, 1991 the network had grown from 17 to more than 50 staffers. Of these, 21 came from the Army's 209th Broadcast Public Affairs Detachment (BPAD), a reserve component unit located in Rome, Georgia. With the BPAD came two of the Army's mobile radio broadcast vans which gave the network additional production capability for supporting the growing demand for spot announcements, and as contingency in case one of the Navy vans became

inoperable or if the network had to move or expand. Also with the onset of the shooting war, the network began its own local newscasts. The finished news programs were telephoned back to AFRTS-BC in Los Angeles, and from there broadcast on the worldwide AFRTS satellite system. Since the newscasts were produced at the network headquarters in Riyadh but the other stations were not connected by dedicated broadcast quality communication this procedure made it possible for all the outlets in the CENTCOM theater to pick-up the newscasts via satellite. The amount and length of news programs from the stateside national networks were also increased. Months after the shooting had stopped in early March, the network stations were finally connected to the headquarters, by then moved to Dhahran, with broadcast quality communications.

Meanwhile, on February 11th, the Air Force Broadcasting Service had assumed operational control of the network. The Navy's charter as the AFRTS contingency operator was for six months, and since at that time no one knew how long the war was going to last, it became necessary for the permanent geographic area manager, the Air Force, to take over. The network's name was changed to the Armed Forces Desert Network (AFDN) and Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Randy Morger took over from Bob Gaylord as network commander. At this point the network was serving nearly half a million troops in the desert!

On March 4th, after the liberation of Kuwait had been completed, a two person advanced team arrived in Kuwait City to arrange for broadcasts to U.S. forces in Kuwait and southern Iraq. They were followed the next day by a nine member team with one of the Army vans. Broadcasting began on March 6th from the American Embassy grounds. A couple of days later the station moved to a U.S. camp near the international airport and on March 10th a 5000-watt transmitter began rebroadcasting the station signal which now reached all of Kuwait and southern Iraq.

From March through the end of 1991, AFDN continued 24-hour manned operations with emphasis on command information for the troops redeploying back stateside or Europe, and planning commenced for eventual unmanned broadcast services for the small residual force that was to remain in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. During July, Air Force Captain Mark Davidson took over command of AFDN with his number one mission being the closing down of all manned operations and the redeployment of most of the equipment. On January 17, 1992, AFDN ceased all manned operations and turned over the remaining satellite delivered radio and television broadcasting systems and equipment to a contractor for maintenance. The history of AFDN had been short but not since the Battle of Britain during the beginning of World War Two could it be said that in war so few had done so much for so many in such little time.

NOTES - CHAPTER 25

(1) Interview with John Burlage, November 25, 1985; Interview with Robert Nash, May 13, 1983.
(2) Burlage Interview.
(3) Interview with Master Chief Joe Ciokin, November 15, 1985.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Ibid.
(7) Ibid.
(8) Ibid.
(9) Ibid.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Ibid.
(12) Ibid; Interview with Robert Jordan, September 26, 1985.
(13) Interview with Bobbie Carleton, December 9, 1985.
(14) Ibid.
(15) Ibid.
(16) Ibid.